

Agency handles consumer gripes against utilities

It's 28 degrees outside and your utility is about to turn off your heat because you didn't pay your bill. What can you do?

If you are like some 5,800 other Oregonians last year who had complaints against their utility, you will contact the Consumer Assistance Division of the state Public Utility Commissioner's office. The PUC may not be able to resolve the situation in your favor, but will act as mediator between you and your utility to assure everyone is treated fairly.

Established in 1970, Consumer Assistance is a section of the PUC whose authority is to represent customers of investor-owned utilities and to protect them from "unjust and unreasonable demands and practices." The division's major emphasis is on resolving individual consumer complaints.

Program Manager Pat Fawcett reports directly to the commissioner and supervises a staff of one parttime and three fulltime employees — coincidentally all women — who respond to consumer complaints. According to Fawcett, a consumer is often referred to the department by a utility which, especially in the case of service disconnects, is required to notify their customers of appeal rights. Referral usually happens when a customer and company disagree on a given situation. Sometimes a social service agency will refer a consumer.

The process of resolving a complaint involves anywhere from 15 minutes for routine inquiries to 60 minutes for the more complex. The consumer analyst listens to the complaint, interprets the situation as best she can, and makes notes that go into a permanent file.

Sometimes she will obtain advice from professional agency staff. Then she calls the utility company to explain what the consumer reported and to find out and record if the company substantiates the information or wants to add something new.

Finally, with both sides of the story in, she makes a judgment on the case. Guidelines that help in analyzing a case include the administrative rules of the agency, tariffs filed by the company, and routine policies and practices that tell how to handle complaints.

"An analyst's job is not necessarily to determine who's right and who's

wrong," Fawcett said, "but what can be done within the constraints of the law, rules and the tariffs to resolve a situation."

Fawcett gave an example of a case. "Say a consumer has a question about the amount of and how to pay a deposit a company is asking for before they'll restore service. Our staff analysis may reveal the company is asking for too much.

"So we would go back to the company and say, 'We feel you're asking too much, and we think you should reduce the deposit. Then we try to negotiate a payment of that deposit.

"Being successful in that, we would report back to the ratepayer, saying, 'We've discussed it with the company. To re-establish your credit you will be charged a \$60 deposit. The company has agreed that you can pay the \$60 over a two-month period.'"

"You could go through a variety of scenarios," Fawcett said, "but the basic process would be the same."

Most cases are handled by telephone or letter, with telephone the preferred method of consumer contact, because it's "more personal and efficient."

However, occasionally a consumer will make a personal visit to the department, located in the Labor and Industries building in the Capitol mall in Salem. In the month of December, for instance, 3 consumers showed up in person to register a complaint, while 410 phoned and

another 39 wrote letters.

One of the most common complaints heard by Consumer Assistance is the threat of disconnect for nonpayment of a bill. Many people who cannot pay their bill turn to the PUC for help, usually at the last minute before disconnect.

Other complaints are as varied as the people who report them. A consumer might call to protest a rate increase that would substantially raise his or her monthly bill. Billing disputes, service out of order, or personal criticism of the commissioner or a utility employee are also heard.

According to senior analyst Joyce Bay, there are no "typical" complaints. "They all have their own

little quirks," says Bay, who has been with the department for 5 years.

While most complaints are legitimate, consumer analysts do get odd calls. Bay tells the story of a man who called to complain about "the chemically-treated cottonballs" in his telephone.

He felt the phone company should put a warning on the receiver of everyone's phone. Consumer Assistance investigated and found that cotton is in fact installed in the receiver — to aid transmission — but it is not chemically treated.

In the case of chronic complainers — people who call in repeatedly — Fawcett says the department's policy is to give the person a chance

to explain his problem again. "In most cases, we will call the company again, make sure there has not been a change in the situation, and then take a firmer approach with the consumer."

On the other hand, real hardship cases come up from time to time. "You get a lot of personal problems revealed to you in the course of taking a complaint — extremely sensitive family situations where you'd like to be able to sit down and pay the person's bill for them," she said.

"If people reveal they need financial assistance," Fawcett said, "we'll refer them to the Department of Human Resources or other agencies who may be able to

come up with some short-term assistance for them."

Throughout the consumer interview process, Fawcett encourages her staff to maintain a professional approach to each case and to avoid becoming personally involved.

"Most of the people who call in react favorably to the information or assistance we give them," she said. "You will always get people who would not be satisfied, regardless of the outcome — somebody who just has to vent their frustrations."

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<p align="center">St. MICHAEL'S CATHOLIC CHURCH</p> <p>Sat. eve Mass 7:30 p.m. Sunday Mass 10:00 a.m. - 6 p.m.</p> <p>St. Johns Catholic Church Welches, Oregon</p> <p>Mass 6 p.m. Sat.; 8 a.m. Sun. Corner Strauss & Pleasant Sandy, Oregon Father Carl Gimpl 668-4446</p>	<p align="center">Gospel of Christ Community Church (Kelso area)</p> <p>Sunday School 9:45 a.m. Morning Worship 11:00 a.m. Evangelist Service 6:00 p.m. Bible Study Wednesday 7:00 p.m.</p> <p>13050 Bobby Bruce Lane Pastor H.O. McAdams 663-6213</p>
<p align="center">SANDY SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH</p> <p>Proctor and University Sabbath School 9:30 a.m. Morning Service 11:00 a.m.</p> <p>You Are Welcome Pastor TERRY ZULL 668-7714 — Home 668-6144 — Church</p>	<p align="center">Sandy Church of the Nazarene</p> <p>Currently meeting at: 17150 University Ave., Sandy (Seventh Day Adventist Church)</p> <p>Sunday School - 9:45 a.m. Morning Worship - 11:00 a.m.</p> <p>Pastor Robert F. Scheifers 668-5712</p>
<p align="center">SANDY ASSEMBLY OF GOD SUNDAY SERVICES</p> <p>Sunday School 9:45 a.m. Morning Worship 10:45 a.m. Evangelistic Service 6:00 p.m.</p> <p>Family Night Wednesday ... 7:00 p.m.</p> <p>Dale Edwards Church PASTOR Phone 668-5589</p>	<p align="center">Chapel of the Hills Bible Fellowship</p> <p>Located E. Hwy. 26 between Sandy & Brightwood</p> <p>Sun. Bible School ... 9:45 a.m. Sun. Worship Serv. 11:00 a.m. Sun. Evening Serv. 6:00 p.m. Wed. Pastor Visitation 7 p.m. Thurs. Bible Study ... 7:15 p.m.</p> <p>You are welcome Independent - Non-denominational Pastor Kent McKinnon Assistant Mike Whisner Call 622-3654</p>
<p align="center">ORIENT DRIVE BAPTIST CHURCH (Southern)</p> <p>15150 S.E. ORIENT DRIVE BORING, OREGON</p> <p>(2½ miles from Sandy)</p> <p>BIBLE STUDY - 9:45 A.M. MORNING WORSHIP - 11:00 A.M. CHURCH TRAINING - 1:00 P.M. AFTERNOON WORSHIP - 2:00 P.M. (PASTOR) Ted Davis CHURCH PHONE - 668-6083 HOME PHONE - 668-6261</p>	<p align="center">Church of the Good Shepherd (Episcopal)</p> <p>Sunday Communion 9 a.m.</p> <p>Midweek Services Tues-Thurs. 10 a.m.</p> <p>Little Pioneer church on West Pioneer Blvd. Father Lindsay Warren 284-7439</p>
<p align="center">Sandy Baptist Church We invite you to join us for fellowship.</p> <p>Church 668-4064 Pastor 668-4795</p> <p align="center">Sunday 9:45 Sunday School 11:00 Morning Worship 6:00 Evening Worship</p> <p align="center">Wednesday 7:30 p.m. Prayer Meeting</p>	

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Public notices

PUBLIC AUCTION LAND SALE
January 23, 1981
at 11:00 a.m.

The Oregon Transportation Commission will offer for sale at public auction, a landlocked parcel of land located on the south side of Highway 26, approximately 1.25 miles east of the east Sandy city limits. The property is further described as follows:

A parcel of land lying in the NE 1/4 NE 1/4 SE 1/4 of Section 19, Township 2 South, Range 5 East, W. M., Clackamas County, Oregon, containing 0.4 acre, more or less.

THE SALE WILL BE HELD in the Region Right of Way office at 9010 SE McLoughlin Blvd., Milwaukie, Oregon.

TERMS OF SALE: Cash sale only. The minimum price that will be accepted is \$1,900. Buyer must deposit \$380 or 20 percent of the sale price, whichever is greater, on date of sale and pay the balance within 60 days. Successful bidder is entitled to possession of property when entire purchase price has been paid. Taxes, if any, to be prorated as of date of sale. The State reserves the right to accept or reject any or all bids. Sale subject to special assessments, existing restrictions, reservations and easements, if any. This sale is further subject to the following: (A) The Oregon Transportation Commission's use restrictions on signboards and all types of junkyards; (B) noise and air pollution clause; and (C) complete restriction of access to highway.

INFORMATION: Region Property Agent, 9002 SE McLoughlin, Portland, Oregon. Phone 853-3123 prior to date of sale, weekdays 8 to 5.
(File 25433, Sale No. 10)

P1280.7
1-1
1-8
1-15
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